

Solutions Journalism Stories Boosts Pro-Environmental Behavioral Intentions Through Positive Affect and Collective Efficacy Beliefs

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Traditional climate coverage has been found to consistently emphasize the negative impacts rather than potential solutions to the climate crisis. Such an approach, while within the watchdog role of journalism, tends to trigger emotional responses that may either motivate or discourage climate-related action overall. Solutions journalism is being put forth as an alternative journalistic approach that combines threat information with solution-focused content to enhance audience engagement with social issues like environmentalism. However, the route between solutions journalism stories and the eventual outcomes (like climate action/engagement) is typically complicated by intermediating processes. So, we wanted to understand two of those common intermediate processes that shape how solutions journalism works: emotional responses and efficacy beliefs. We argued that the impact of solutions journalism depends on the level of positive emotions people feel and if they feel more efficacious after reading the story.

To achieve this, we conducted an experiment where we randomly assigned people to two types of stories (solutions-oriented versus problem-oriented), with both stories highlighting a flooding issue, but only the solutions-oriented version including information about community responses and adaptations. Afterward, they responded to several survey questions about their levels of efficacy beliefs, affect (emotional responses), and intentions to engage in pro-environmental behaviors,

With regard to efficacy beliefs, we asked them questions about both self-efficacy (their belief in their own ability to make a difference) and collective efficacy (their belief in the capacity of groups to address climate issues effectively). This is because collective efficacy is particularly relevant to climate change, which represents a collective problem that affects everyone and requires collaborative action between communities, organizations, and governments to address effectively.

Main Findings

Our findings revealed that solutions-oriented stories significantly boosted pro-environmental behavioral intentions, but this relationship was fully mediated by positive affect and collective efficacy beliefs. This means that solutions journalism might not solely influence behavior, but rather works by creating positive emotional responses and enhancing people's confidence in collective action, which in turn motivates pro-environmental intentions.

Conditional Effects

We also found that after accounting for these mediators, the direct relationship between solutions stories and behavioral intentions became negative. This means that if participants do not feel positive after reading a solutions journalism story and report less efficacy beliefs, they are unlikely to engage in behavioral actions. This shows complex psychological processes at work that may be explained by the fact after accounting for heightened positive states and efficacy beliefs, what remains could just be a diminished sense of necessity or complacency to act.

Practical Applications

However, it is a ray of sunlight to know that when solutions journalism triggers positive emotions, they tend to translate to more efficacy beliefs and ultimately, intentions to engage in climate actions. This implies that journalists and climate communicators who include solutions journalism approaches to their climate reporting can create an informed and engaged citizenry empowered for environmental action. Unlike conventional problem-oriented approaches that may induce fear without direction, solutions journalism provides both the awareness of issues and pathways for engagement, making it a valuable tool in climate communication when properly implemented to enhance both emotional responses and collective efficacy beliefs.

Conclusion

While we must acknowledge the limitation of our sample which might not fully represent the U.S. population as well as the focus on a single climate solutions story at one point in time, this study contributes to the emerging field of solutions journalism research, particularly in environmental communications, by showing how positive emotions and belief in our collective power work together to drive action. In simple terms, when journalists write stories that not only alarm us about problems but also show communities successfully tackling those problems, they help readers feel both hopeful and capable.